

EARLY PHRENOLOGY

THE philosophy of the human mind became at an early age the most interesting study to Combe. Whilst still a youth he read the works of Locke, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, David Hume, Dr. Reid, and Dugald Stewart. But he failed at first to understand them; and was baffled in his efforts to apply their principles to the explanation of the phenomena of active life. . . .

The number of the *Edinburgh Review* for June 1815 contained a long article on "the Doctrines of Gall and Spurzheim." The author was Dr. John Gordon, a private lecturer on anatomy and physiology in Edinburgh, who had published a few years previously a work on "The Structure of the Brain, comprising an estimate of the claims of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim." He had also written the review of a "Letter from Charles Villers to Georges Cuvier, on a New Theory of the Brain as the immediate Organ of the Intellectual and Moral Faculties; by Dr. Gall," which appeared in the *Edinburgh* in April 1803. He had followed up the subject; he was a skilful and vigorous opponent of the system of phrenology; and now in 1815 he seemed to gather all his powers into one effort to extinguish forever the "man of skulls," as he contemptuously styled the founder of the new science. Satire, ridicule, fierce and sometimes coarse invectives, were employed against the unlucky phrenologists; wherever there was a hole to be picked in their argument it was picked with thorough relish of the task; and Dr. Gordon had the satisfaction of finding many holes. Two brief quotations from the review itself will best show the nature of the article.

"We look upon the whole doctrines taught by these two modern peripatetics, anatomical, physiological, and physiognomical, as a piece of *thorough quackery* from beginning to end." The review concluded with these words: "The writings of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim have not added one fact to the stock of our knowledge, respecting either the structure or the functions of man; but consist of such a mixture of gross errors, extravagant absurdities, downright misstatements, and unmeaning quotations from Scripture as can leave no doubt, we apprehend, in the minds of honest and intelligent men, as to the real ignorance, the real hypocrisy, and the real empiricism of the authors."

The review was one of those displays of rough vigour which the *Edinburgh* in those days was fond of making. Readers laughed at the jokes and retailed them, were amused by the remorseless drubbing which the quacks received, and forgot altogether to inquire whether or not there were anything to be said on the part of the victims. George Combe, like others, followed the lead of the *Review*, and in his own circle did his best to heap ridicule upon Gall and Spurzheim's pretensions. Spurzheim was lecturing in Dublin when this onslaught was made, and as soon as he had read it he hastened to Edinburgh to meet his censor face to face, or, failing that, to give a course of lectures on the enemy's own ground, which should be a public answer to the attack on the principles of phrenology. Combe laughed at the Quixote, refused to go to hear him, and the first course of lectures in Edinburgh were concluded without having even seen the man who was to exercise the most powerful influence on his future life.

In the introduction to his lectures in America (Boston, October 1838) Combe gives the following account of his meeting with Spurzheim:

"It chanced that on leaving the Court of Session one day a friend of mine, a barrister, said: 'Would you like to see Dr. Spurzheim dissect the brain?' My reply was: 'Yes, very much.' 'Then, come to my house to-day at one o'clock.' I went and saw Dr. Spurzheim for the first time. He laid the *Edinburgh Review* on the table. Then he proceeded to display the structure of the brain in a manner inexpressibly superior to that of my late teacher, Dr. Barclay; and I saw with my own eyes that the reviewer had shown profound ignorance, and descended to gross misrepresentation in regard to the appearances presented by this organ when dissected by a skilful anatomist. My faith in the reviewer was shaken; and I attended Dr. Spurzheim's second course of lectures. At the close of the series I had attained the conviction that the faculties of the mind which he had expounded bore a much greater resemblance to those which I had observed operating in active life, than did those of which I had read in the works of metaphysicians; but I was not convinced that these faculties manifested themselves by particular parts of the brain. Dr. Spurzheim himself had told us that this conviction could be reached only by extensive personal observation. All my former interest in the study of mind was now re-awakened. I procured from London a large collection of casts illustrative of the different organs.

When they arrived in two large sugar puncheons, were brought forth, and ranged on my drawing-room floor, they looked all so white, and so exactly alike, that I felt ashamed of my own folly; and in my belief that the distinctions between them were too minute for my limited powers of observation ever to discriminate, I would have hid them if I could. But the fact of their arrival had got abroad among my friends, and they came in troops to see them. I was forced to tell them all I knew about the casts—and that at first was very little; but to my own surprise I discovered that at each succeeding explanation which I attempted, the subject grew upon myself. I saw clear and obvious distinctions between casts, which on a hasty and impatient glance had appeared exactly to resemble each other; and by reading and conversation I acquired a greatly extended and much more accurate acquaintance with the mental talents and dispositions of the individuals, the casts of whose heads I had before me, than I had previously possessed. I also examined the heads of many living persons whose characters I knew; and at the end of three years' study I became convinced that Phrenology was true.

“In proportion to the increase of knowledge in my own mind was the interest of my expositions heightened, until at length the applications for an account of the casts became so numerous that I was forced to devote certain days and hours to gratify the public curiosity. Time rolled on, and my expectation that the general interest in the subject would cease was never realized. On the contrary, I was entreated to announce public expositions of Phrenology as the only method of doing justice to the subject, to the inquirers after truth, and to myself. Thus I became a phrenologist and a lecturer on phrenology by a concatenation of circumstances which were not foreseen by myself, and the ultimate consequences of which I never contemplated when I began the study.

“During all this time I continued to devote myself to the discharge of my professional duties, assiduously and earnestly. I depended solely on my professional success for the means of subsistence, and the only serious trial which presented itself during this progress of events, was the alarm of some of my best friends lest I should ruin myself by espousing a cause which was the laughing-stock of all men of reputation, and which no abilities of mine could even render triumphant. Don Quixote's assault upon the wind-mill was regarded as an equal match of

strength compared with my venturous presumption in entering the lists as an author and a lecturer against public opinion, in defence of a doctrine which, it was said, was denounced as a gross delusion by every philosopher in Europe. I was totally without fortune, reputation, or influential connections. It was even said by some that I must have become insane on this subject by constantly dwelling upon it. But these ominous anticipations of ruined fortunes and public condemnation never for a moment disturbed my equanimity. I had now attained a thorough conviction that phrenology was true and important. I felt an instinctive reliance on the justice of mankind, and believed that those who had hitherto befriended me would not desert me unless I should forfeit their confidence by actual neglect of the duties which I owed them. I increased my attention to business in proportion as I knew that it was expected I should neglect it, and I was completely successful.

"I introduce this statement to encourage those who may be at any time intimidated in the pursuit of truth by similar forebodings. If they strive to discharge the duties of their calling with increased diligence, and prove by facts that they are not neglecting their proper business while they are advocating truth, society will not desert them. In humble gratitude to God, and in justice to man, I make the acknowledgment that my own prosperity and happiness increased every day after I had resolved to brave all dangers in defence of phrenology."

The foregoing passages show that Combe's enthusiasm as a phrenologist was guided and kept in control by his practical shrewdness as a man of business. . . .

Gibbon, Charles: *The Life of George Combe*. London, Macmillan, 1878, vol. 1, pp. 92-97.